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# Gender within the Pursuit of Doctoral Education: The Case of Zimbabwe Higher Education

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## Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by female PhD students in the pursuit of their doctoral education in Zimbabwe. The study's broad aim was to explore female PhD students' experiences within their doctoral studies. The study sample was formed of 12 students and three deans of higher degree studies from three top-ranking universities providing doctoral education in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was employed to settle on the participants and data were solicited through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. Data revealed that more male than female students pursued PhD studies and that more male than female students completed their PhD studies within the stipulated period of study. Data also revealed a myriad of gendered challenges that female PhD students encounter on their doctoral education journeys. The significance of the study is its contribution to research on doctoral education in Zimbabwe in general, as well as to the deepening of knowledge on the various challenges females pursuing PhD studies face.

**Keywords:** doctoral education; gender; higher education

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## About the author

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## Introduction

One of the notable features of African higher education in recent years is its massive expansion (Tamrat and Fetene 2021). This expansion is accompanied by a quest for advancing excellence, focusing both on increasing the number of higher education institutions and on improving their quality (Kurtz-Costes et al. 2006; Tamrat and Fetene 2021). One way of advancing excellence in higher education is the introduction of doctoral education. As such, doctoral education has become a subject of sustained interest for many scholars and researchers (Cloete et al. 2015; Molla and Cuthbert 2016; Tsephe and Potgieter 2022). Efforts in almost all African countries are geared towards strengthening doctoral education, and Zimbabwe is no exception. Zimbabwe's efforts towards strengthening doctoral education, as well as the understudied gender aspects of doctoral education in Africa as a whole and in Zimbabwe specifically, inspired and motivated this study.

Research on doctoral education in Zimbabwe is growing. This includes work on exploring the qualifications of academic staff at Great Zimbabwe University (Garwe and Tirivanhu 2015), establishing the status of doctoral education in the country (Garwe 2015), assessing the status and practice of doctoral education at a newly established rural university in Zimbabwe (Makoni and Makoni 2022), and examining the perceptions of students who dropped out of their doctoral studies (Chinangure 2024). Even as all these studies highlight some of the challenges encountered by PhD students in Zimbabwe, they all consider the doctoral education context in a social vacuum and thus neglect to explore the gendered dimensions of the challenges. This is the important extra detail which this study offers. The research questions guiding this study asked: What are the gender dimensions of doctoral education in Zimbabwe? What are the female students' experiences of their doctoral studies? Did the female students feel differently impacted by the challenges in their doctoral education?

## Doctoral education and its importance

A doctorate is the most advanced academic qualification, awarded to a student who has successfully completed research (Van't Land 2011). The independent research is expected to contribute new knowledge and literature to the field of study (Kutz-Costes et al. 2006; Sanchez-Jimenez et al. 2023). Receiving the degree also means becoming part of what Carter et al. (2013, 340) call the 'academic tribe'; that is, the alliances that are formed in institutions of higher learning based on academic disciplines. These alliances have their unique rules, practices, and values.

The importance of doctoral education for nation building is well documented (Van't Land 2011; Khodabocus 2016; Mohamedbhai 2020). The world over, doctoral education is a driver for sustainable economic development (Cloete et al. 2015; Fredua-Kwateng 2021) and an indicator of developmental capacity. Countries with larger numbers of highly educated people can achieve faster economic growth and can better sustain socio-economic development (Mohamedbhai 2018). Individuals who attain doctoral education are believed to be equipped with the relevant knowledge, values, and skills to drive and enhance the socioeconomic development of their countries. Doctoral education as a driving force for the growth of the knowledge economy, is, therefore, key to nation building, as it increases the nation's capacity to deal with and address multiple complex issues (Maheu et al. 2014; Khodabocus 2016). Thus, together with other factors, doctoral education boosts national productivity, innovation, and economic growth. Therefore, doctoral education is critical to the development trajectory of a country, acting as an "engine for growth of the knowledge economy" (Khodabocus 2016, 25), Doctoral education thus has purpose and economic value.

## Africa's doctoral education context

While there might be variations from country to country, doctoral education statistics on African countries point to a common feature of low PhD output (Darley 2021). It can therefore be argued that African countries need to increase their doctoral education output for the development trajectory of the continent to change for the better (Teferra 2013; Mohamedbhai 2020). Doctoral education plays a crucial role in economies and the recognition that Africa needs people with PhDs has made some African countries, such as Ghana and Ethiopia, develop strategic educational plans whose central focus is increasing doctoral education output (Molla and Cuthbert 2016).

South Africa stands indisputably as Africa's hub of doctoral education, with a goal that 75% of its academics will have completed PhDs by 2030. Several other countries, including Senegal, Kenya, and Nigeria, have prescribed periods within which the members teaching at their universities should have attained PhDs. Organizations such as the European Union, the World Bank, the African Union, the German Academic and Exchange Service, among others, have pledged willingness to support PhD studies in many African countries (Mohamedbhai 2020). This gesture of support is due to the recognition that while knowledge capital is key to the success of societies and nations (World Bank 2009), Africa is at the periphery of the knowledge economy (Jowi 2021). The continent contributes only about 1% of the global knowledge capital (Darley 2021) and "is at the bottom of every knowledge indicator" (Hayward and Ncayiyana 2014, 182). This gesture has, undoubtedly, contributed to growth and expansion in doctoral education in Africa. However, the expansion has been observed to have exerted pressure on the already strained capacity of Africa's higher education institutions (Jowi 2021). Challenges resulting from the pressure exerted were put forward at the African Higher Education Summit on the Revitalization of African Higher Education for Africa's Future, held in 2015 (Mba 2017), but studies show that these challenges, including, among other things, limited support and capacity due to lack of resources, still plague the continent (Van't Land 2011; Teferra 2013; Darley 2021; Fredua-Kwateng 2021; Jowi 2021; Tamrat and Fetene 2021).

Several challenges have been registered. Supervisor deficits, for example, are experienced in most African countries as more academics are being pushed to pursue PhD studies against an almost stagnant, and in some cases diminishing, pool of potential supervisors (Hayward and Ncayiyana 2014). This leads to supervisor overload, which overwhelms the few available supervisors, resulting in a decline in the quality of the supervision. African countries such as Zimbabwe are experiencing this, mostly because their economies are doing badly, forcing many experienced academics to leave for more attractive jobs in more affluent economies. Some academics leave for other African countries, which they feel offer better salaries and working conditions (Fredua-Kwateng 2021). Sourcing PhD supervisors from outside the borders may not be possible, as the institutions may not be able to pay attractive supervisor fees. The few supervisors who soldier on in most cases 'moonlight' (work more than one job at a time) to supplement their meagre salaries, which leads to the quality of their PhD supervision being compromised. In some cases, underqualified supervisors are engaged, which leads to poor supervision.

In most African countries, the private sector, which elsewhere is able to strengthen research capacity, is weak, limited, or non-existent because of the poor state of the economy. Meagre funding of the institutions that host PhD students is another challenge recorded. The inadequate funding may result in no provision of essential services, such as internet connectivity, which in turn makes it difficult to ensure and sustain quality PhD studies and supervision. Poor quality control measures

have also been cited as one of the challenges impending effective PhD provision.

The challenges have cultivated an African environment that is unsupportive of effective doctoral education production. The challenges are felt even more for females who, in addition to facing all the above-mentioned challenges, are also at the receiving end of gender discrimination and inequality. The current study focused on examining the specific gender dimensions of the challenges female PhD students encounter on their doctoral journeys.

## The Zimbabwe doctoral education landscape

To help Zimbabwe implement its National Development Strategy 1 (2021–2025), which aims at responding to the global sustainable development goals, Zimbabwe universities are expected to strengthen and enhance their research capacities to respond to the skills demanded by Zimbabwe society. In this endeavour, doctoral education contributes to development by developing the country's knowledge economy. In Zimbabwe, it is recognized that the doctoral education of faculty members enhances the quality of university degree offerings (Garwe 2015) and universities are attempting to ensure that their teaching staff hold the qualification; this is why increasing the number of PhD holders is now prioritized in most institutional strategies. Having a PhD is an important determinant of promotion in academia in Zimbabwe. Earning a PhD thus not only raises one's academic prestige, but equally significant, it also offers the possibility of promotion. Doctoral education is therefore a public good in Zimbabwe and PhD holders enjoy enhanced social recognition. Garwe and Tirivanhu (2015) report that at the Great Zimbabwe University alone, the number of academic staff pursuing PhDs increased from one in 2009 to 133 in 2015. Challenges already mentioned regarding Africa are deeply felt in Zimbabwe. This can be seen in the severe brain drain that has been triggered primarily by the deteriorating salaries and conditions of service for university faculty, as well as by high inflation. As far back as 2005, universities in Zimbabwe were already grappling with an exodus of experienced academics (Mushonga and Nyakudya 2011) and failing to attract experienced academics to replace those who were leaving (Chetsanga 2010; Mupemhi and Mupemhi 2011). This challenge exists to this day.

In Zimbabwe, PhD candidates constitute 0.18% of the total higher education student population (Garwe 2015). The shortage of qualified and committed supervisors, coupled with limited regard and concern for the structure of doctoral education, may be the greatest challenge for doctoral education in the country. Low renumeration demotivates the few available supervisors, leading to a lack of commitment from the supervisors. Almost none of the universities offer training in PhD supervision and this results in low quality supervisors. As argued by Khodabocus (2016), quality doctorates depend significantly on quality supervision, and much improvement is needed in Zimbabwe in this regard. Also noteworthy is the fact that doctoral education is costly, so the need for adequate funding cannot be overemphasized for Zimbabwe.

## Research methodology

### *Preliminary inquiry*

A preliminary inquiry preceded the research. The purpose of the inquiry was to determine the top-ranking universities in the country which offer PhD studies to their academic employees. Since this information was not available on the websites of the universities, it meant getting the information through the registrars' offices. The inquiry established the three universities that formed the research case studies. All three universities were state run.

***Study investigation***

In this study a qualitative approach was adopted. The study adopted an interpretivist philosophical grounding due to its aim of accessing the interviewees' own accounts of their experiences. In line with this philosophy, a qualitative approach was utilized to enable the exploration and comprehension of the challenges female PhD students faced from their own perspectives and understanding. The qualitative approach assisted in gathering information without pre-conceived assumptions. The approach utilized face-to-face interviews with the three deans with higher degrees, and telephone interviews with the students. Recruitment of students for the study was done by phoning, using the list of students obtained from the deans with higher degrees. The selection technique for the three deans of research was purposive as they were best placed to speak about PhD matters in their universities because of their responsibility for overseeing PhD issues. I also employed purposive sampling to decide on the student participants. Regarding this group of participants, the determining aspects were: i) being female; ii) pursuing or having pursued a PhD with the employing university; iii) being in the final year of studies or having completed PhD studies in 2022. Since the data gathering was conducted in March 2023, the students who had completed their studies in 2022 were considered to hold the freshest memories of their PhD journey. Guided by the research questions, these two groups of student participants were selected 'on purpose' (Creswell and Clark 2011). They had the most recent experience of doing and completing a PhD, and thus had a detailed understanding of the context of the issue and were best placed in terms of information richness (Patton 2002). To ensure that the participants were not idiosyncratic to a single study discipline, none of the students were from the same departments (Table 1).

**Table 1: Description of Student Sample**

| Participant | Marital status | Stage of study | Sex of supervisor(s) | Name of university | Field of PhD studies |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ruu | married | in-stream | male and male | A | Natural Sciences (Physics) |
| Suu | married | completed | female | C | Social Science (Media Studies) |
| Vee | married | completed | male | B | Education (Mathematics) |
| Cee | married | completed | male | C | Medicine |
| Kuu | married | in-stream | male | C | Agriculture |
| Cuu | single | completed | male | A | Education (Early Childhood) |
| Buu | single | in-stream | male | C | Business Science (Accounting) |
| Paa | widowed | in-stream | male | B | Social Science (Human Resource Management) |
| Taa | married | in-stream | female | A | Law |
| Chuu | married | in-stream | female | B | Arts (English) |
| Maa | married | in-stream | female | C | Engineering |
| Zii | married | completed | male and female | A | Arts (Development Studies) |

Interviews with students were held mostly in the early evening, at agreed times when Wi-Fi connectivity was more stable and better; I utilized WhatsApp calling, which was more affordable, since the study was self-supported. Open-ended questions were asked to give the participants full freedom to talk about their experiences of doctoral education. In all cases, I ensured that key points of the study were touched on. Conversations with each participant continued until no new information was acquired (Miles and Huberman 1994). In all, 15 interviews were held. All the interviews were audio-recorded to avoid loss of data.

The age range of the student participants was 27 to 51 years, and all of the student participants were mothers. Nine of the mothers were married, two were single mothers (one who completed in 2022 with university A and the other one who was in-stream with University C), and one mother from university B was widowed.

## Ethical considerations

The study was subject to ethics approval from the institutions studied. Approval to carry out the study was granted by the authorities of the three universities. Participants' availability and willingness to participate in the study was expressed through a consent form (for the universities' deans of research) and verbally (for the students). Interviews with the participants proceeded only after approval was granted. Explanations were given to the participants regarding the intended use of the data, as well as their right to view their information. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time they felt like doing so. The consent applied to their participation in the study as well as to the use of the information and the publication of the results. All the names used in this study are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. This assisted in getting full information from the participants, as they felt that their identities were protected.

## Data analysis

The data analysis approach utilized in the study was the 'deductive reflexive thematic approach' (Braun and Clarke 2020; Campbell et al. 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis is a method where the subjectivity of the researcher is viewed not as a potential threat or challenge but, instead, is valued as central and integral to the analysis process (Campbell et al. 2021). Data were grouped according to themes. The six steps of the reflexive thematic analysis process as outlined by Campbell et al. (2021) were followed. These are: i) data familiarization, ii) code generating, iii) construction of themes, iv) reviewing of potential themes, v) naming of themes, and vi) report production. The rather small sample of 15 participants made the construction of themes from the lengthy interviews feasible. In presenting the data, I first present general information and then the data themes.

The study is a case study, which means that it studies individuals rather than populations (Terre-Blanche et al. 2006). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the study still provides an insightful overview of the phenomenon under analysis.

## Research findings

### *General information*

All the universities studied offered PhDs by thesis, whereby a student, (having produced a topic and an acceptable proposal) is guided from start to finish through the thesis by a supervisor. All the universities offered individual and team supervision. All the students in the study had dual status with their institutions, as all operated as both lecturers and PhD students. This meant that all the students took their PhD studies on a part-time basis and, for all of them, the workload from the institution did not take account of the students' PhD

studies. The benefit that all the students had was an exemption from paying tuition fees.

According to statistics provided by the deans of research studies on 26 January 2023, there was an imbalance in doctoral education uptake by men and women, with the number of men being higher than the number of women. At university A there were 25 PhD students, and of these 19 were male, while only six were female. At university B, the total number of students was 21, of whom 16 were male and five were female. At university C, the total was 19, 12 males and seven females. This imbalance is in opposition to what has been found in Portugal by Cardoso et al. (2022), whose longitudinal study stretching from 1970 to 2016 registered a gender balance in terms of PhD participation. Disequilibrium was only registered when considerations were made by discipline. However, this finding of the present study was corroborated by studies by others (Leemann 2002; Raddon 2002; UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2009; Barone and Assirelli 2019; Sari et al. 2019; Jowi 2021), all of which registered gender imbalances in both PhD uptake and subject area. Leemann (2002) studied the situation in Switzerland; Sari et al. (2019) studied the situations in Turkey, Finland, Sweden, Germany, and France; and Barone and Assirelli (2020) examined the Italian situation. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2009) study had a global coverage. Jowi (2021) analyzed the state of doctoral education in six sub-Saharan African universities. The aforementioned corroborating studies did not reveal any distinctions, but all confirmed that more males than females completed their PhD studies and that more females than males leave their studies along the way. Sari et al. (2019) attribute this phenomenon to a multiplicity of factors and contexts that females find themselves in. Chief among these factors are the constrains of social life, a phenomenon Zuckerman and Cole (1975) term 'the principle of triple penalty'. The principle of triple penalty refers to 'cultural inappropriateness' (women embarking on something that is determined as inappropriate by their culture), the perceived incompetencies of women, and direct discrimination against women. Pursuing the same line of thought, Sari et al. (2019) talk about 'emancipated' but 'unliberated' women, meaning that women's rights are proclaimed on paper, but due to the patriarchy they are not liberated. Other factors referred to in research originate from psychological theories, which claim that academics tend to collaborate more with other academics of the same gender (Blackburn 2017; Holman et al. 2018), as individuals look to individuals perceived as similar to themselves as role models. Concurring with this line of thought, Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) found that women doctoral students who had female supervisors reported higher levels of self-esteem, aspirations, and work commitment than those who had male supervisors. Sanchez-Jimenez et al.'s (2023) longitudinal study on Spanish universities from 1977 to 2021 echoes these findings, a phenomenon Holman et al. (2018) and Holman and Morandin (2019) term 'gender assortativity' or 'homophily', the preference for interacting with individuals of the same gender. These authors found that female PhD students find that their male supervisors exclude them from informal discussions affecting them as students and seek their opinions less when compared to female supervisors.

In this study, more males than females completed their studies within the normal stipulated period of study. At university A, a total of nine students completed their PhD studies in 2022, and of these only two were female. At university B, seven students completed their PhD studies in 2022 and of these only one was female. At university C, six completed their studies in 2022, and of these two were female. The same skewedness was observed for the students in their final year of studies. The ratios of male to female were 6:1, 2:1, and 8:3 for universities A, B, and C respectively. The findings were consistent with the UNESCO Institute of

Statistics' global report (2009) that revealed persistent gender disparities in doctoral education uptake and completion in favour of men. The findings were, however, partially inconsistent with Mastekaasa's (2005) study on Norway. As in Mastekaasa's study, more males obtained doctoral degrees. However, Mastekaasa's study recorded more men dropping out of their studies, seemingly due to attractive opportunities in non-academic labour markets, whereas in this study, conversations with the deans of research revealed a higher female attrition rate, and also a prolonged completion rate.

### *Female doctoral students' perspectives on their doctoral education journeys*

*Triple overlap of home, work, and study*

While a study by Zuckerman and Cole (1975) found that the type of institution had an impact on the students' perceptions and perspectives of doctoral education, this study's data did not reveal significant differences in views about doctoral education across institutions. The informants concurred that a PhD is a challenging, overwhelming, and demanding pathway. All the research participants were pursuing or had pursued their PhDs through research. They did not attend any lectures or courses, but at the end they had to produce a thesis which they defended before an examining panel of specialists appointed by the university. The thesis had to be original, with innovative solutions to existing challenges. Only at university C did the students attend an orientation seminar at the beginning of their PhD studies.

Regardless of the institution, the informants talked about home-study incompatibility, as they found the work-life balance a 'tightrope' and the main reason for the high attrition and delayed completion rate. Referring to the high attrition rate of female PhD students, Ruu of university A said:

> I find my home-study engagements strenuous, and I think this is the reason two of those that I enrolled together with have terminated their studies. I hardly have enough time for my studies. I have for now forgone my social life. I cannot go to church, social clubs and sometimes even some funerals. I even sometimes have reduced sleeping time. (Ruu, interview, March 10, 2023)

Ruu's views were corroborated by Suu of university C, who said that:

> I used to wake up almost every day mentally and physically tired. Mentally because the issues of my studies kept nagging, and physically because the mother-wife responsibilities ate my energy for other activities. I completed my studies by the grace of God. Had it not been for my supervisor who kept pushing me, I would have almost reached the stage of surrender. Almost all I did was last minute rush. A study mate pulled out only after nine months of study. (Suu, interview, March 15, 2023)

The area of PhD study had no significant effect. The difficult work-life balance could be the reason why the three deans of research studies reported that most females graduated later than their normal progression time and why they also stated that women's doctoral progress was slower than that of men. The two students who graduated in 2022 from university A had both taken the maximum time allowed to their studies to complete. The one that graduated from university B had deferred studies for a year to nurse her baby and took the maximum permissible time for study. This student (Vee) had this to say:

> We cannot half compare with men because men are spared of the biological duties of pregnancy and breast feeding. This is why, us mothers may not finish PhD studies as quickly as men do. When one misses study time by a year, as was in my case, one automatically works under pressure. The pressure is very frustrating and dampens one's morale. The result is perceiving one's PhD studies as a bother and if one is not strong enough, one may opt out of the programme. (Vee, interview, March 23, 2023)

From the above excerpt, the woman is now frustrated, and her frustration can cause her to underperform, falsely giving the impression that men perform better than women. This issue relates to the social construction of gender roles, which makes women invest more effort in the home and in care work (Sari et al. 2019).

Of the two who completed their PhDs with university C, one graduated within the stipulated timeframe, while the other had received a warning that she risked having the decision 'study period lapsed' passed on her if she went beyond June 2022. She had to take vacation leave to enable her to concentrate on finishing her studies. She, like the others, blamed the incompatibility of unpaid labour and study. She argued that: "The layered roles of wife, motherhood and working woman were difficult to balance. Of these, only 'PhD student' could be neglected as it had no direct relevance with what was expected of me." (Cee, interview, March 30, 2023)

The same constraint was registered as a great drawback by Kuu, from the same university, who spoke about the two roles of wife and mother:

> Motherhood is better as I can assign older children and the housemaid to assist. But marital role, I cannot assign anyone and if I fail to perform them, then I would have failed my marriage. Remember Proverbs 14 – The wise woman builds her own house, but the foolish woman destroys it with her own hands. (Kuu, interview, March 17, 2023)

Reading between the lines, Kuu and Cee feared clashing with the normative behaviour expected by society of a mother and a wife, and could not give up on their housewifery and motherhood roles.

The above excerpts depict the difficulties of harmonizing the demands on the wife, mother, lecturer, and PhD student, resulting in women giving up their studies. A number of studies have found that women are more likely to give up on their PhDs because of societal restraints that create pressure and stress on women (Sari et al. 2019; Fisher et. al. 2020; UNESCO 2020, UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean 2021; Rodrigo and Clavero 2022). These studies established that women had higher attrition rates than men, and that more males than females completed their PhDs within the regulated timeframes. The triple workload of home, work, and study responsibilities were found to be a gendered terrain by which women felt their male counterparts were not as impacted as they were. This might have been so, as nine out of the 12 students interviewed were married women and the other three students, though not married, were mothers. The nine married women found PhD work interfered with their social life more than it was likely in the case of men's studies. The three women who were not married also felt this, as they also expressed that men in their position were not cluttered with home responsibilities as they were. While the institutions studied offered equal access to doctoral education to males and females, equal access did not lead to equal outcomes.

The cultural expectations of married women proved to be highly resistant to changing times in Zimbabwe, a country where marriage is highly regarded, and where unmarried women, no matter how well educated or financially successful, are regarded as lowly. Even as Zimbabwean society is evolving, most men still shun educated women and society at large does not seem to have a high regard for unmarried women. This could be the reason why Cee, pressed with responsibilities, found her PhD studies the only thing that could be neglected from the pressing lot. This woman said that she only attended to her PhD studies after fulfilling her responsibilities as a wife and mother. This finding resonates with Sari et al. (2019), who found that, under pressure, women did not give up their housewifery and motherhood roles.

*Time spent on PhD work.*

Another recorded hurdle was reduced time for study. Almost all the participants spoke of constrained time for study. All the women were working, being lecturers at the institutions. These women were taking their doctoral studies alongside with their work duties. They could only attend to doctoral work after working hours. This usually meant staying behind after working hours to avoid inconveniences like power cuts (because at the work place the generators run for students till ten o'clock in the evening), disruptions in the home, and a non-conducive work environment. The women were of the view that, unlike for their male counterparts, social norms discriminated against the women. One of them remarked that:

> Men remain working on their PhD after work, but I cannot. I must ask for permission from my husband. How many times can that permission be granted? Even if it were granted, the home will still be waiting for me. That man wants his supper, children want me to read them their bedtime stories. If I fail to perform these socially expected roles, I will have failed as a wife and as a mother. (Chuu, interview, March 23, 2023)

What is clear from this response is that the woman feels under pressure as a result of gender stereotypes that demand that women be devoted to certain roles. The woman seeks to conform to societal expectations and seems to feel that being a woman is a burden.

Resonating with the idea of women being constrained by societal expectations, Kuu said that:

> My husband is a PhD holder, but I tell you that it does not cross his mind that I am a student just as he was when we allowed him a space of his own. He insists that we have another child, yet he cannot even assist with taking care of the one we have. Where will I get the time to manage two children, a husband, my work, and my studies? (Kuu, interview, March 17, 2023)

It is important to note from the conversations with these women that they were normalizing patriarchy, affirming an observation made earlier that what disadvantages women is that they are trapped in an androcentric culture which is full of misogynistic norms (Burton 2014). Undoing this culture calls for 'de-genderizing' the status quo, as advocated for by Zuckerman and Cole (1975). Without 'de-genderizing', universities remain 'gendered and gendering' institutions (Rodrigo and Clavero 2022).

The findings unveil the fact that combining work, home, and study had disadvantageous outcomes for the female PhD students. The nine married students reported straddling four competing identities – that of a university

worker, that of a PhD student, that of a mother, and that of a wife. They felt that their male counterparts were not as disadvantaged, as they experienced only the two domains of worker and student. The female students found the interplay of their domains stressful as it led to them experiencing inadequate sleep time (Ruu), increased tiredness (Suu), and the draining of energy (Roo). Thus, the women felt that the doctoral education journey is gendered as it privileges men.

### *Gendered financial woes*

Securing funding for PhD studies was cited by the women as another hurdle in their pursuit of doctoral education. Chinangure (2024), whose study focused on students who dropped out of their PhD studies at three universities in Zimbabwe, reports that, at the present moment, lack of funding is the greatest challenge that forces PhD students, who rely solely on university funding, to abandon their studies. With the economic environment in the country seemingly worsening, it might come to a point where universities fail to offer any financial support to its lecturers when pursuing the much-needed qualification. What it might then come to is total 'student self-funding' for PhD studies.

Although the universities in this research assisted the doctoral students with some funding, especially for data collection, the doctoral students found the amounts far too small, to the extent that the students were effectively self-supporting. This was particularly felt by the two students whose studies demanded experiments. One of them was from university A, pursuing a PhD in science, and the other one was from university C, pursuing studies in agriculture. Besides demanding a lot of time, experiments were reported to be very expensive, as they demanded specialized equipment and consumables, not to mention frequent visits to the laboratories where students needed to work. These visits were reported to be expensive. The female students lamented that, unlike their male counterparts, they did not have much money for this, as, compared to men, they had more needs that their money should cover, especially household expenses. Not only does the women's gender push them to work more unpaid hours than men, it also pushes them to spend more of their own income on the family.

Taa shared her situation, saying:

> Our salaries are too meagre for our financial responsibilities as mothers. Men do not carry some of the financial burdens that we carry such as housemaid salary, day to day perishables, and the like. For me this has a huge burden on what I can spare as study fees resulting in a tremendous impact on my mental health and wellbeing, a situation which stymies progress on my studies. How I wish the university could assist with study loans. (Taa, interview, March 10, 2023)

The student mothers therefore claimed to have barely any money to spare for studies. Only two students (one from university A and the other from university C) had received funding information from their supervisors that could enable them to seek funding from outside the institution. Because of the lack of funds for registration, five students (two from university B, one from university A, and two from university C) reported delayed registration, which resulted in delayed consultations with their supervisors, because of funding challenges that were due to poor salaries.

### *Differences between male and female supervisors*

While the practice elsewhere may be that a student chooses his/her PhD supervisor, at the institutions studied, supervisors were allocated

to students by their respective departments of study. However, all the PhD students expressed their appreciation of their supervisors, male or female. Asked for any two adjectives that could describe their PhD supervisors, eight students described their supervisors as 'supportive', ten described them as 'encouraging', three described them as 'tolerant', another three as 'understanding', and one as 'available'. All the students concurred that their supervisors facilitated their professional development. None was particularly unhappy with her supervisor. They all found their supervisors quite knowledgeable about their areas of supervision. However, the four students under female supervision (three in-stream and one graduate) found their supervisors acting more as 'friends' with whom they could share their personal concerns, worries, and challenges and be listened to. This was corroborated by the two students who were under mixed gender supervision. On this topic Buu said:

> I changed supervisors. While my former male supervisor treated me like an academic, my new female supervisor has made effort to know me not only as an academic, but also as a person. Within my first month of working with her she reached out to me to share any challenges I might have been encountering with my studies. Like my former supervisor, she wanted to keep track of where I was as a student and was very relaxed with deadlines, unlike my former who was iron strict with deadlines. (Buu, interview, March 24, 2023).

This sentiment about female supervisors was reiterated by Zii, who, like Buu, had experience of mixed gender supervision. She had just completed her studies and had this to say:

> Of the two, I found my female supervisor being more involved in my work, of course without pushing me to the edge. This somehow drew me closer to her than was the case with my other supervisor. I ended up freer to share with her any impediments in my way should I fail to meet a deadline. The other supervisor remained distant, and somehow put me under pressure with deadlines and other presentations. (Zii, interview, March 9, 2023)

Making similar observations was Taa, who said the following about her female supervisor: "She invited me for tea at one point. I met her wondering and shivering about what I had done wrong, only to find that she was just checking on me wanting to know more of me as a social being." (Taa, interview, March 10, 2023)

None of the students who were under male supervision mentioned anything along the lines of moral and emotional support. Further questioning of the four students under female supervision revealed that they found their supervisors 'understanding' of issues of home and family. The most plausible reason for this is that the female supervisors might have similar experiences to their female students. It could also be that the female supervisors were motivated to create more female academics and scholars. Studies have mixed findings in this regard. A study by Miller and Ivey (2006) reported a greater connection between female supervisees and male supervisors than was the case with female supervisors. The findings of this study are, however, consistent with studies that indicate that female PhD students found their male supervisors to have little tolerance of social discussions of issues affecting them as students (Hindes and Andrews 2011). Having these concerns dismissed can be interpreted as a low value being attached to women and their issues. Indirectly, the impact could be

a dampening of morale for the female PhD students. In comparison to their male counterparts, female PhD students thus encountered discrimination in their PhD journeys. Doctoral education continues to be patriarchal (Leonard 2001; Raddon 2002).

*Impact of role models*

The three deans shared the observation that very few women were professors (either within or outside the institution). The relative lack of women professors means that female PhD students lack role models.

Speaking on the importance of role models, one of the deans stated that:

> Role models not only intrinsically motivate the PhD female student, but they make her strive to imitate standards they set. They are, therefore, the source of the students' inspiration, support, encouragement, and guidance. They are a given for self-growth. (Takunda, interview, March 2, 2023)

The above view was corroborated by another dean who commented that "role models make students perceive more choices than they would have seen without the role model. So, the more they are, the better for the students" (Tapiwa, interview, March 7, 2023).

The comments made indicate that role modelling has its place in creating effective channels that influence women's choices, as the women 'see' and 'believe'. Thus, lack of role models creates a non-captivating atmosphere for other females (Kurtz-Costes et al. 2006) and could be a reason fewer females than males pursue doctoral education (Raddon 2002).

## Conclusions

This study revealed a myriad of challenges that female students faced on their PhD journeys. The challenges were not gender blind and their cumulative effect disadvantaged female PhD students. Close analysis of the data reveals that those who had abandoned their studies, though seemingly voluntarily pulling out, were in fact pushed out by the hostile and non-supportive social and institutional environment. The environment was found to privilege men more than women. Unless the environment is made more gender friendly and responsive, there might be little reason to be optimistic about Zimbabwe benefiting from its human resource development. To become a middle-class economy, Zimbabwe must get maximum and full benefit from its human resources – both men and women. If these issues are not addressed, then the pursuit of doctoral studies may pose a hidden crisis.

The female PhD students found work, study, and social life incompatible. Home-study conflicts were the main challenges that dominated the students' road to their PhDs. Institutionally, the one-size-fits-all approach and policy towards PhD studies for male and female lecturers was found to disadvantage women. These challenges were exacerbated by societal expectations and gender norms that placed a heavier burden on women in terms of unpaid labour and domestic responsibilities. The study highlighted the need for a more supportive environment that recognizes and accommodates the multiple roles and responsibilities of female PhD students.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on doctoral education in Africa and the gender dimensions of this educational context. The findings shed light on the unique challenges faced by female PhD students and the need for targeted support and interventions to address these challenges. The study calls for the development of policies and programmes that promote gender equality in doctoral education, including increased

funding, flexible working arrangements, and mentorship programmes. By addressing these challenges and promoting gender equality, Zimbabwe can strengthen its doctoral education system and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and equitable society.

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## Interviews

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Ruu, online interview by Efiritha Chauraya, March 10, 2023.

Suu, online interview by Efiritha Chauraya, March 15, 2023.

Taa, online interview by Efiritha Chauraya, March 10, 2023.

Takunda, in-person interview by Efiritha Chauraya, Harare, Zimbabwe, March 2, 2023.

Tapiwa,in-person interview by Efiritha Chauraya, Gweru, Zimbabwe, March 6, 2023.

Vee, online interview by Efiritha Chauraya, March 23, 2023.

Zii, online interview by Efiritha Chauraya, March 14, 2023.